

Late one evening last week on the way to the ranch, one of my neighbors waved me down in the worst part of the highway that's torn up between Mertz and Barnhart. The shoulders were so steep and irregular that we barely had space to park, but what he had to report was worth risking my life, especially when you consider how perilous it is these days of clear skies and murky economy.

He had to shout to make me hear, "Monte, you got an elk in that pasture north and west of the gas plant," he hollered. Every time I'd try to find out whether it was a bull or a cow, an oil transport would roar by and nearly knock us off in the ditch. I was almost too excited to listen, but I finally understood it was a big yearling he'd seen on his fenceline.

I had a hard time sleeping that night for drawing the plans for a commercial game preserve. In my head I'd sketch off a big lodge with a huge fireplace for the hunters to gather around at night. I couldn't remember if I'd ever heard how many cows to run to a bull elk. One of my neighbors has a small herd of elk, but I didn't think it'd be a very good time to be asking his advice, not until such minor matters as a clear title was worked out on my new herd bull.

Something else I knew was going to be sticky was how to raise the money for the stock. Last year one of the big financial newspapers reported that one of the complaints Texans were having about newcomers entering our banking scene was that these out of state jugs weren't loaning any money to cover ostrich raising or other important investments, like bets on the Super Bowl.

Without their warning, I knew that raising the cash to buy elk to run in the Shortgrass Country was going to be handled at the drive-in window. By daylight I was so exhausted that I didn't even feel like driving down to see my new business at close hand.

We haven't been able to sook the elk onto the feed ground. In fact, the passport guy that's been down there so long can't even find any tracks or elk sign. All I've been out so far was the creative effort it took to design a brochure to advertise my hunting lodge. It'll be just my luck for the elk to turn out to be a dry weather apparition.